**“WHAT FILM IS YOUR FILM LIKE?”:   
NEGOTIATING AUTHENTICITY IN THE DISTRIBUTIVE SERIALITY OF THE *ZOMBI* FRANCHISE**

The modern zombie, unlike its archetypal cinematic contemporaries the vampire, the werewolf, and even the mummy (the creature to which it is perhaps most indebted), has had a relatively short existence. Modern constructions of the creature are almost universally derived from George Romero’s influential series that began in 1968 with *The Night of the Living Dead*, and while there are earlier examples of zombie (in films like *I Walked with a Zombie,* [Tourneur 1943]), previous renderings were usually drawn from Haitian mythology and undead slaves of voodoo traditions.[[1]](#footnote-1) Romero’s zombie was an entirely different creature, functioning as an apocalyptic cypher and providing social commentary in times of political unrest. Released in the wake of the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, *The Night of the Living Dead* is almost universally seen as both a response to both the Vietnam War and a commentary on the American civil rights movement, with later entries into the series seen to offer a commentaries on capitalism, consumerism, gender roles and social media, ensuring that Romero’s zombie remained a resolutely political creature (c.f. Terence McSweeney, 2010).

Outside of this series and since the dawn of the new millennium, there has been a noticeable rise in the visibility, success and profitability of the zombie, visible across all media platforms with many continuing to draw political parallels, keen to attribute the visibility of the creature in the 21st century to society’s amplified response to the trauma of domestic terrorism and the events of September 11th in the United States and July 7th in the United Kingdom (McSweeney, 2010, Wetmore Jr., 2011). Behind the political flexibility of the creature and such overtly ideological readings also exist economic drivers, whereby the presence and visibility of the modern zombie can be attributed to the eagerness of distributors worldwide to capitalise on the genre’s popularity through a process of retitling and re-releasing narratively unrelated films as sequels to popular releases in promotional strategies that began over two decades before the turn of the 21st century.

This article will consider the ways in which distributors, first in Italy, and then subsequently in the United Kingdom, Germany, Thailand and the United States, have all contributed to the formation of an unofficial series of zombie films through a practice of retitling narratively unconnected films. Using this series of unrelated films, I will examine how an expanded notion of genre specific to Italy, and a precedent for narratively unconnected serialisation pioneered by Romero in the United States, has been adopted and adapted by distributors worldwide. I will explore how consumers negotiate the commercially imposed seriality of the unofficial ‘distributive series’; films whose only connection is their incorporation into a franchise by distributors hoping to capitalise on the success of an earlier entry. Through an exploration of the illegitimate series, it is then possible to illustrate how this kind of adaptation is informed by a sub-cultural adoption of Italy’s expanded notion of genre, through which, in lieu of official seriality, priority is given to other filmic elements as a means of constructing authenticity.

**SEQUELS, SERIALISATION, RETITLING AND THE ADAPTATIVE PRACTICE OF EUROPEAN EXPLOITATION**

Re-titling is a relatively common practice in the transnational film industry and, from country to country, films will often receive a new title to ensure a greater cultural resonance. Sometimes this practice is to remove nationally-specific associations, as was the case with *The Avengers Assemble* (2012); retitled for release in the United Kingdomfrom *The Avengers* to avoid confusion with the 1960s British television series of the same name. Occasionally this process occurs as the result of attempts to ensure a broader cultural appeal, as was likely the case with the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2010), retitled from its originalliteral Swedish title of *Men Who Hate Women* (2010). However, the most common instances of retitling can be seen within the production and distribution of the exploitation film, where films are produced inexpensively for maximum return and routinely ‘piggy back’ on the success of another film. Often this piggybacking takes the form of the production of narratively similar copies produced to capitalise on the commercial appeal of any given film, a strategy that I.Q. Hunter (2009) has argued can be considered a form of adaptation. Hunter explores the wave of ‘Jawsploitation’ that followed the massive box office success of Spielberg’s *Jaws* in 1975. This film stimulated the production of series of inexpensive copies worldwide: first in the United States with the thrillers *Orca* (1977), then the less prestigious *Mako: The Jaws of Death* (1976*), Great White Death* (1981), and even a porn parodycalled *Gums* (1976). In Mexico, there was *Tintorera: Killer Shark* (1977), whilst in Italy it reinvigorated interest in related “creature features” like *Tentacles* (1977), and the more obviously directly inspired *The Shark Hunter* (1979), *The Last Shark* (1981), and *Monster Shark* (1984) and later films like *Deep Blood* (1990) and *Cruel Jaws* (1995), the latter example released in the domestic Italian market as *Jaws 5: Cruel Jaws*. In his study Hunter observes that ‘imitation is, of course, standard practice across all entertainment media [and] Hollywood minimises risk by sticking closely to generic formulae and updating familiar properties in disguised versions’ (2009:10). The main difference between Hollywood’s approach and these “mockbusters” is that exploitation cinema is often simply less concerned with disguising the formula than it is with capitalising on the success and appeal that the formula provides.

Nowhere is this disregard for disguising the formula more explicit than in the exploitation of completely fabricated associations that come from the retitling and serialisation of otherwise unrelated films, as seen with *Jaws 5: Cruel Jaws*. Though less prevalent elsewhere, in Italy much of the country’s domestic film production was historically based on responding to the box-office appeal of domestic or international film successes by producing their own sequels. A home-grown success like Sergio Corbucci’s seminal spaghetti western *Django* (1966) showcases this adaptive process in a microcosm. The Spaghetti Western itself was an industrial response to enduring commercial appeal of the imported American Western and it stimulated a cycle of films that was produced by the Italian studios between 1962 and 1980 and that saw the production of almost five hundred films (Fisher, 2011:2). *Django* was an Italian western produced to capitalise on the success of Sergio Leone’s ‘Dollars trilogy’, but when the film proved to be a success, it spawned more than thirty unofficial sequels, with the character portrayed by sixteen different actors, with often the only connection being the title to hang the story around.

As unusual and illegitimate as this practice might at first appear to Anglo-American audiences, Italy has a long tradition of promoting films this way, and the practice is not limited to domestically-produced films. American imports would often receive similar treatment, with unofficial sequels produced or unrelated films retitled in an attempt to capitalise on the domestic appeal of commercially profitable imports. While these sequels might appear to be cheap ‘knock-offs’ flaunting international intellectual property rights, for a long time they were a vital part of the Italian film industry. High profile horror film imports like *Alien* (1979), *The Evil Dead* (1982), and the zombie film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), were all serialised by the Italian film industry as part of this process. *Alien* saw implicit sequels, films that borrowed narrative elements from the official *Alien* film, in films such as Luigi Cozzi’s *Alien Contamination* (1980, internationally released as *Contamination*). But it also saw explicit sequels, films that were retitled to appear as if they were the next entry in the official series, such as *Alien Terror* (1980);retitled in Italy to *Alien 2 Sulla Terra / Alien 2: On Earth.* Similarly, the success of both *The Evil Dead* (1981) and *The Evil Dead II* (1987), released in Italy as *La Casa* and *La Casa 2*, contributed to an unofficial extension to the series with the inclusion of unrelated Italian films: *La Casa 3* (1988), globally released as *Ghosthouse*; *La Casa 4* (1988), globally released as *Witchery*; and *La Casa 5* (1990) globally released as *Beyond Darkness*. The inclusion of unrelated locally-produced films into *The Evil Dead* franchise may be surprising enough from an Anglo-American perspective, but perhaps more unusual is that following these additions, the Italian version of the series concluded with two equally unrelated American films that were themselves part of another unrelated American series; *House II: The Second Story* (1987) and *House III: The Horror Show* (1989) were released in Italy as *La Casa 6* and *La Casa 7* respectively. This both ignores the official narrative fidelity of the legitimate sequel, *The Evil Dead 3: Army of Darkness* (1992), but it also demonstrates a willingness in Italy to accept generically similar films into a pre-established series that it is unlikely would have been accepted elsewhere.

While this practice may at first appear disingenuous to Anglo-American eyes, it is reliant upon a broader cultural understanding of genre that is specific to Italy. The peculiarity of Italian film culture destabilises traditional notions of genre, and suggests that they might not offer a sufficient framework through which to understand the specificities of the Italian film industry. In his introduction to the Giallo (a subset of the thriller and horror genres particular to Italian literature and film), Gary Needham notes the Italian concept of *filone*, which he argues is capable of challenging Anglo-American preconceptions of a fixed ‘taxonomic imaginary’ (2002). Instead, he suggests that *filone* can be used to describe genres and cycles as well as currents and trends. Mikel J. Koven later frames discussion of the concept though the phrases ‘sullo stesso filone’ (in the tradition of) or ‘seguire il filone’ (to follow in the tradition of), adding that the nearest English equivalent would be ‘in the vein of’ (2006:5). These definitions provides some perspective on ways in which Italy appeared to embrace what would have otherwise been dismissed as inauthentic and fake in the Anglo-American marketplace. It also gives a broader cultural canvas for the practice of producing unofficial sequels. There is little that could be more in the tradition of the first film, than part two, the sequel to the first film.

**ADAPTATION & NARRATIVE FIDELITY:   
SERIALISING THE DAWN OF THE DEAD**

The practice of serialising unrelated zombie films began with the success of *Dawn of the Dead.* The success of the film in 1978 stimulated a cycle of zombie films in Italy that would take the practice of *filone* far beyond the national borders of the country. Similar to the success of the Spaghetti Western in the 1960s and 1970s, the zombie film was responsible for much of Italy’s output during the late 1970s and 1980s, and included films like *Nightmare City* (1980), *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (1974), *Zombie Holocaust* (1979), and *Burial Ground: The Nights of Terror* (1981). All notable examples, all narratively unconnected, but significantly, have all have been incorporated into the *Zombi* franchise as sequels to either *Zombi* (1978) (AKA *Dawn of the Dead*)*,*or *Zombi 2* (1979) (AKA Zombie Flesh Eaters) at some point and in some territory throughout the world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Though the *Zombi* series begins with this cycle and the success of *Dawn of the Dead,* Italian involvement in this franchise is more complicated than the country simply producing cheap “knock-offs” or a pseudo-sequel as they had done with *Contamination*. Italian horror director Dario Argento had helped George Romero develop the story and had assisted in securing the finance to support the production of *Dawn of the Dead*. In exchange, Argento retained control of the European edit of the film and received international distribution rights. His edit was retitled to simply it as *Zombi,* and though it ignored any connection to its prequel *Night of the Living Dead*, its success ensured the release of an Italian produced sequel the following year. The sequel, *Zombi II,* was neither narratively connected to the first, nor in anyway connected to Argento or Romero. Instead, veteran director Lucio Fulci directed a film that would be sold globally as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, going on to become the inaugural entry in an unofficial zombie franchise that would be sold around the world.

In the special features for the UK release of non sequitur Alien sequel *Contamination*, director Luigi Cozzi suggested that ‘[I]n Italy, when you bring a script to a producer, the first question he asks is not “what is your film like?” but “what film is your film like?” That’s the way it is, we can only make *Zombi 2*, never *Zombi* (*Dawn of the Dead*)’. However, despite Cozzi’s frustration at the apparent limitations that were imposed upon him under the Italian studio system, *Zombi 2* or *Zombie Flesh Eaters* as it is more commonly known, is a film that succeeds despite being born out of this system of imitation and despite being developed as a pseudo-sequel to *Dawn of the Dead*. While Cozzi mourned the limitations placed on the creativity of the Italian directors, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* would find worldwide commercial success and mark the beginning of a whole new franchise with distributors selling the film to the international marketplace as the first part of a brand new series.

To understand how this series developed, it is first necessary to first understand how a decision by George Romero in the production of *Dawn of the Dead* helped to stimulate the production or serialisation of numerous unrelated films as sequels to his original series worldwide. *Dawn of the Dead* is a direct sequel to *Night of the Living Dead,* and takes place, seemingly in the same timeframe, and in the same dystopian landscape, but makes no reference the characters or locales from the first film. Instead, it focusses on a different pocket of survivors and their struggle against the living dead. While this narrative device allowed Romero to foreground different issues, and contributed to his films being read as responses to racism, capitalism, consumerism, gender roles in society and social media, it also allowed for adaptation and serialisation irrespective of national boundaries. *Dawn of the Dead* is the official sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, which was followed by *Day of the Dead* (1985)*, Land of the Dead* (2005)*, Diary of the Dead* (2007) and finally *Survival of the Dead* (2009). This is the official series. However, the series does not follow any continuity of narrative and instead maps the survival of the human race and the response to the zombie epidemic over a forty-one year period. In approaching his series in this way, Romero established a trope for a lack of narrative continuity between official sequels that allowed unrelated sequels to be incorporated into the timeline by savvy distributors seeking to capitalise on a fictional association with the success of first film.

**MAPPING THE GENRE: ‘THE CONFUSING AS FUCK “ZOMBI” SERIES’**

*Zombi 2* was the first of the unofficial Italian sequels and was the most successful of these sequels , but to understand both the impact of this film, and the degree to which this practice of retitling and serialisation has been adopted worldwide, it is useful to map the series in its various incarnations, tracing unofficial entires back to their epicentre and to Romero’s seminal *Night of the Living Dead,* the film that marks the beginning of the official line. Through this process, what emerges is a complex, non-linear, and often overlapping history that is often difficult to understand and has been labelled ‘the confusing as fuck *Zombi* series’ online by a blogger who began charting the series (Criterionmaster, 2009). To assist in this, *Figure* 1 offers a visual representation of the franchise cartography, essentially mapping the multiple lines in the series and their various intersections, along with the original titles, alternative titles, the country of origin for each film, and the country of origin for each “distributive series”.

Since Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* isthe birthplace of the modern zombie, it is somewhat appropriate that it is also the point of origin from which all other unofficial zombie lines spill. The film was shot, directed and edited by George A. Romero, and was co-written by Romero and John Russo, and unlikely as it might seem, the film started out primarily as a comedy horror. Over a number of rewrites the film was refined into something that more closely resembled the post-apocalyptic narrative of Richard Matheson novel *I am Legend* (1954)*,* swapping vampires for the ghoulish undead, and in doing so, adding a contemporary archetypal villain to the modern horror cannon. In 1978, after a clerical error left the film in the public domain, Romero (independent of Russo) returned to series, and in collaboration with Dario Argento, produced *Dawn of the Dead*. Seven years later he added *Day of the Dead* (1985)*,* and completed what would for many years be a trilogy. Twenty years later Romero returned to the zombie film, adding *Land of the Dead* (2005)*,* *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), with plans to extend the series further before his death in 2017. Though there are still ardent fans that give priority to the first three films, referring to the series as a trilogy, or divide the films into the first trilogy or the second trilogy, these six films present the official entries into the series,the six films that were written and directed by George A. Romero.

As already discussed, the success of *Dawn of the Dead* on its release in Italy inspired a flurry of creativity, and zombie films soon dominated production. *Dawn of the Dead,* or *Zombi* as it was known in Italy, soon had an unrelated sequel directed by veteran Italian exploitation director Lucio Fulcio, a seasoned Italian director who at that time was more famous for producing westerns, comedies and giallo. Despite being an unofficial sequel, the importance of Fulci’s *Zombi 2* cannot be underestimated. Beyond its hugely memorable set-pieces of the zombies stumbling over the Brooklyn Bridge, an underwater sequence where a zombie attacks a shark, and the trauma of a wooden splinter being forced into the eye of a screaming Olga Karlatos, the film became hugely significant worldwide, inspiring another sequel in Italy; *Zombi 3,* and became the first in a succession of films that would become known worldwide as the *Zombi* series.

In the United Kingdom, any association with the Romero series was dropped and the film was released as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*. Two versions of the film were released; a version that had been approved for cinematic screenings by the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), and then later, since there was no regulatory body governing video in the UK at that time, an uncut version which restored all of the material that had been deemed too problematic for theatrical consumption by the BBFC. Its UK distributor VIPCO became embroiled in the ‘video nasties’ moral panic that was sweeping Britain and the film was banned under the Obscene Publications Act and subsequently removed from the shelves. The categorisation as a ‘video nasty’ contributed to the film’s notoriety and many years later when the moral panic had subsided, distributor VIPCO were able to re-release the film, followed shortly by *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2*, an official sequel to the Italian line and the film released in Italy as *Zombi 3*. Partially directed by Lucio Fulci and following the precedent set by Romero, the film was not a narrative continuation, and simply focussed in on another pocket of survivors struggling against the zombie hordes. Recognising the trend, in the UK VIPCO decided to capitalise on the lack of narrative continuity by releasing *Oltre la morte* (a.k.a. *After Death*)as *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (1988), as a sequel to the unofficial sequel. These three films complete the British line. Then the films were released in Thailand in a series that follows the order of release, beginning with *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*), then *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (*Zombi 3*), and adding *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (*Oltre la morte*, a.k.a*. After Death*). However, they also added *Zombie Flesh Eaters 4* (1988) to the series, a previously unrelated film originally retitled from its original title *Killing Birds* (*Uccelli assassin*).

When the series was released in America the line became even more confused with two different distributors releasing two different lines. Neither sequence claims any connection with Romero’s series, presumably, given the success of the Romero line, any association would have appeared disingenuous and would have likely contributed to legal action against the distributor. In the absence of an official starting point, the first series begins with *Zombi 2* (*Zombie Flesh Eaters*), which was Anglicised to *Zombie 2* for the US market, with subsequent entries in the series following the lineage of releases in Thailand, though the numbering is offset, whereby number three becomes number four, and number four becomes number five. So for the US series, *Zombi 3* (*Zombie Flesh Eaters 2*) retitled to *Zombie 3*, *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (*Oltre la morte*, a.k.a. *After Death*) is retitled to *Zombie 4: After Death*, and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 4* (*Uccelli assassin / Killing Birds*), retitled to *Zombie 5: Killing Birds*.

As if this wasn’t confusing enough, the American experience of these films is further complicated by a second series released by -Z Video (a.k.a. Edde Entertainment) in the 1990s. Again, in the absence of an official starting point, *Zombi 2* was released as both part two, but also as part one – two releases of the same film retitled so as to avoid a break in narrative continuity. The series then broke away altogether from the established progression previously seen in the Italian, British and Thai lines and began to incorporate previously unrelated titles from Italy, Spain and France. *Zombie 3: Return of the Zombies* (1973) was an unrelated Spanish film directed by José Luis Merino and starring Paul Naschy originally titled *The Hanging Woman* (*La orgía de los muertos*). *Zombie 4: A Virgin Among the Living Dead* (1973) was a French / Spanish co-production directed by Jess Franco and is a film more widely known as *A Virgin Among the Living Dead* (*Christina, princesse de l'érotisme*). *Zombie 5: Revenge in the House of Usher* (1982), again directed by Jess Franco was an unrelated French release that was originally simply *Revenge in the House of Usher.* *Zombie 6: Monster Hunter* (1981) was an Italian film directed by Joe D'Amato and originally released as *Absurd*, was itself a sequel to the film that would be released as *Zombie 7*, Joe D'Amato's *Anthropophagus* (1980).

To add to all of the confusion of the American line, the German series initially appears to follow the official line; beginning with Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (retitled to *Zombie*), but the sequence avoids the Italian sequel, Fulci’s *Zombi 2* (a film released separately in Germany as *Woodo: The Dread Island of Zombies*)*.* Instead, the series follows the official Romero line, continuing with *Day of the Dead*, albeit retitled to *Zombie 2*, but then adds *Zombi 3,* which since it was the official sequel to *Zombi 2*, would perhaps have better been released in Germany as *Woodoo 2*. Again, this narrative is also further complicated by a secondary line in Germany that begins with *Dawn of the Dead* (retitled *Zombie 1*), and then progresses to *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (retitled to *Zombie 2*), and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (retitled to *Zombie 3*).

As difficult as all of this is to follow, this narrative is confused further by the fact that there also exists what could be considered as a second official line, produced by *Night of the Living Dead* ­co-writer, John Russo. Following production of *Night of the Living Dead,* Romeroand Russo fell into a dispute about the direction of any possible sequel. Since the film had fallen into the public domain, this allowed Romero to develop *Dawn of the Dead* independently and in spite of Russo’s reservations. This meant that as co-writer, Russo retained the rights to any titles featuring *Living Dead* and he began developing his own line beginning with *Return of the Living Dead* released in 1985. Though tangential, this can be considered a second official sequel to *Night of the Living Dead,* giving rise to four further American-made sequels; *Return of the Living Dead Part II* (1988), *Return of the Living Dead 3* (1993), *Return of the Living Dead: Necropolis* (2005) and *Return of the Living Dead: Rave to the Grave* (2005). As if this weren’t complex enough, adding to an already convoluted narrative is the fact that Russo produced and co-produced respectively, a remake of *Night of the Living Dead* (1990), on which he collaborated with Romero, and a direct-to-video release called *Children of the Living Dead* (2001). And all of this does not even take into account the American remakes of the series that began in 2004.

While many fans and cinephiles are happy to accept the legitimacy of Romero’s and Russo’s contributions, it would be too reductive to simply dismiss the European entries simply as the flagrant attempts of distributors to capitalise upon the success of *Zombi 2 or Dawn of the Dead*.Though these lines are clearly motivated by the commercial impulses of the producers and distributors, there are other factors that must be considered here. It is significant that other than in Italy, the country were this practice and the unofficial zombie series began, distributors worldwide have almost universally chosen not to include *Dawn of the Dead* as the starting point. Outside of Italy, the only country to include *Dawn of the Dead* is Germany, and their series also includes *Day of the Dead*, only adding *Zombi 3* as a conclusion to their series. In an Anglo-American context this could possibly be attributed to two factors: firstly, the decision in the USA and the UK not begin the series with *Dawn of the Dead* is most likely indicative of the potential for issues to arise over copyright infringement. Even in the exploitation film market there are instances where companies have been prosecuted for attempting to capitalise on the success of another bigger budget film.

In the UK for example, video distributor World of Video 2000 retitled an old low-budget sci-fi film called *Night Fright* (1967) to *E.T. Nasty*, hoping to capitalise on both the success of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and the notoriety of the ‘video nasties’ moral panic. Suffice to say, this was not without repercussion and when Universal International Pictures threatened legal action, World of Video 2000 were forced to re-call the cassette only to later re-release it with an amended title and different artwork. While not a big-budget blockbuster like *E.T*., one might assume that the same would may have been true for *Dawn of the Dead* had distributors tried to capitalise on this association in an Anglo-American context. Secondly, and probably the most likely explanation is that if *Dawn of the Dead* was popular enough to stimulate the production of so many different zombie films, then it is unlikely that these films would have been accepted as sequels to *Dawn of the Dead* in the UK and the US with our limited Anglo-Amercian concept of genre,. The fact that distributors’ decided to begin the new series with *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombie 2*) suggests that in the Anglo-American market at least, there is a tipping point, a level of success at which an unrelated sequel will be dismissed as inauthentic, illegitimate or fraudulent. However, this does not account for the many entries into the series worldwide that take *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (*Zombie 2*) as their starting point, or the importance that is placed upon this film. After all, this film was the starting point for numerous unofficial sequels and these were not challenged in the same way. It could be that the market that grew around the zombie genre is more willing to collectively group Italian produced films together together on the basis of a shared trashy exploitation aesthetic. This of course begins as marketing strategy on the part of the distributor, but there is no real evidence of resistance to these unofficial series on the grounds of seriality. However, hypothetical reasons aside, the only way to measure the acceptance of these films, beyond the continued serialisation, is to consider the response to these various releases, which I explore in the next section.

**RESPONSES TO RETITLING THE ZOMBI SERIES**  
To measure public responses to distributors releasing unrelated films into the *Zombi* series I concentrated on *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3. Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* presents the first real break from the “official” sequence of unofficially produced sequels in the unofficial line. To clarify this point, while none of the films in the series are narratively connected, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* 3 (Zombi 4) is often dismissed because it was not directed by Lucio Fulci, where *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*), and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (*Zombi 3*), were both directed by him. Though the second film was only partially directed by Fulci, this has association has nevertheless given the film a pedigree that has served to protect it from some of the criticisms typically levied at the unofficial sequel. Conversely, *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (*Zombi 4*) is a completely unrelated film, it is not directed by Fulci and is not narratively sequential, the film was retitled by distributors in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Thailand, all hoping to capitalise on the commercial appeal of the *Zombi* brand. This lack of an official pedigree means that *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* is the most appropriate entry in the series through which to discuss reactions to retitling, providing a space in which official seriality is not applicable. Since this film has been retitled by four different distributors in four different countries, and the online shopping portal Amazon provides nationally specific websites, this provided the most convenient way of collecting information that would otherwise be incredibly difficult to access.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though there is no Thai specific platform for Amazon, the company has a nationally specific platform for the UK, the US, and Germany, Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.com and Amazon.de. [[4]](#footnote-4) Through this it is then possible to view responses to the practice of unofficial serialisation.

*Zombie 3* (*Zombie Flesh Eaters 4*) has generated a total of 87 reviews across the UK, US and German specific portals of the international shopping site. This total is comprised of 13 responses in the UK, 56 responses in the US, and 18 responses in Germany. From this data I removed one review from the United States and one review from the Germany, as this duplicated reviews that were already present. I then coded the data based on seven recurrent themes that were visible across all three of the datasets: 1) whether the reviewer made any direct reference to the film or the series being unrelated to each other; 2) whether the review emphasised the director in their perception of whether or not he film should be considered important; 3) whether the reviewer emphasised the presentation of gore within the film; 4) whether the overall quality of the presentation was discussed; 5) whether they made any reference to the film being cut, either historically or in that version; 6) whether the reviewer framed discussion of the film in terms of being a ‘bad movie’, that could primarily be enjoyed by virtue of it being ‘so bad it’s good’; and 7) and whether they made any explicit reference to the narrative throughout the review.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **UK 13 reviews** | | **US 56 reviews\*** | **DE 18 reviews\*** | **Total** | **%** |
| Makes reference to the series being unconnected | 3 | 8 | | 4 | 15 | 17.6 |
| Emphasises the director | 5 | 29 | | 11 | 45 | 52.9 |
| Emphasises Gore horror elements | 8 | 17 | | 7 | 32 | 37.6 |
| Emphasises the quality of the presentation | 12 | 13 | | 1 | 26 | 30.5 |
| Reference the film being cut / restored | 0 | 8 | | 15 | 23 | 27 |
| Reviews the narrative | 1 | 9 | | 5 | 15 | 17.6 |
| So bad it’s good | 6 | 15 | | 2 | 23 | 27 |

\*One review removed from the United States dataset and one review removed from the German dataset to avoid duplication.

With the vast majority of reviewers across the three territories choose not to emphasise the fact that the film was narratively unconnected to its predecessor, one could easily extrapolate that this aspect of the film’s lineage was of no importance to them. However, rather than infer meaning into this absence I will instead isolate responses that did focus on this aspect of the release, and consider the relationship of those responses to the other criteria in order to better understand consumer responses to the practice of retitling.

15 reviews out the 85 usable responses made explicit reference to the fact that the films were narratively unconnected. That equates to 17.6% of the reviews emphasising the lack of serial connectivity, the same number that foregrounded a narrative description within their review. This suggests that official seriality was important to those concerned with narrative fidelity. While this number is significant, over half of the UK and US respondents (a total of 52.9%), were more concerned that the film was not directed by Lucio Fulci, and a similar percentage of the German reviewers noted that it was not directed by George Romero (where the films was released as a sequel to Romero’s series). Because if this, all three sets of reviewers felt that the lack of ‘authentic’ director-figure meant the film could not be considered as canonical. Implicitly linked to this, and the second most important criterion highlighted by the data after the importance placed upon the director, was the priority given to the gory elements of the film. Lucio Fulci is often referred to as ‘The Godfather of Gore’ and Romero is often called ‘The Godfather of the Dead’, and this association is reflected in 37.6% of the reviews that were more concerned that the film be gruesome in its depiction, compared with only 17.6% demonstrating any concern that the film be narratively connected. Linked to this is of course an emphasis on whether the film was presented in its full uncensored form (27%), a factor that also contributed to 30.5% of reviewers concerned about the overall quality of the presentation of the film.

The reviews that do foreground the lack of seriality are either understated; ‘*Zombie 3* does not really have anything to do with the first two films’ (A customer, 2001), or for the German respondents, ‘this movie is not a 3rd part of George A. Romero's hit zombie trilogy’ (Sunbeam, 2002). Or more specific, speculating that bad reviews of the film could be attributed to its lineage, and that responses to the film have been tainted by the fact that it is ‘the pseudo-sequel to a genre classic, which was itself a pseudo-sequel to THE genre classic’ (General Zombie, 2005). Assessing the merits of the film in similar terms, a reviewer calling themselves The Soft Machine Operator explains that ‘Fulci's original *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*) was an unofficial sequel to Romero's *Zombi* (*Dawn of the dead*). Not content with releasing *Zombi 3* on us, they are now renaming even worse 80s Italian Zombie movies as unofficial sequels to the unofficial sequel’ (The Soft Machine Operator, 2002). What is significant to both these reviews is that implicitly the criterion for inclusion appears to be one of quality, rather than the film’s pedigree. The user acknowledges that *Zombie Flesh Eaters* is an unofficial sequel, re-titled to capitalise on the success of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and appears to acknowledge *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (1988) as an official sequel, despite not approving of the quality. The problem occurs with *Zombie 3*, when another unrelated sequel, but a film that is deemed to be of a significantly lesser quality is included into the series, suggesting that for this reviewer a subjective idea of quality is what is important.

**CONCLUSION**

Whether these films are actually understood as sequels in an Anglo-American sense of the word is debatable. However, their commercial acceptance for audiences does raise interesting questions about the ways in which consumers are negotiating these different films and the basis on which they choose to include or exclude particular entries in the series. In her study of film adaptation *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (2008), Christine Geraghty suggests that ‘faithfulness matters if it matters to the viewer’ (2008:3), and although she was primarily concerned with literary adaptation into film, this idea has a resonance here, in the economically-enforced seriality of the ‘distributive series’. With no narrative fidelity to speak of, faithfulness cannot be based upon whether these films are narratively sequential, so consumers are constructing authenticity and interconnectedness by other means. I.Q Hunter suggests that ‘adaptation, much like genre itself, is a method of standardising production and repackaging the familiar within an economy of sameness and difference’ (2009: 9). These negotiations demonstrate this repackaging of the familiar within an economy of sameness and difference and allow enough diversification to extend

It is significant that the director as an auteur figure is central to over half of these responses, while the level of gore also plays a pivotal role in the acceptance of these films. Indeed, this overarching emphasis on gore above all else can be seen to build upon and expand this idea of narrative fidelity, incorporating genre specific tropes through faithfulness to the traditions of the zombie film. This demonstrates an acceptance that these films - while not ‘official’ sequel productions - present tropes, themes and trends common to the film on which they are drawing from and in that way will ‘follow in the tradition of’ the first film generically. The implication here is that outside of Italy, in countries without an established tradition of *filone*, audiences are finding ways to negotiate imposed ‘distributive seriality’ by creating connections that work to restore the authenticity of the unofficial sequel. Rather than simply dismiss these entries as illegitimate, the unofficial series tells us a great deal about the ways in which consumers are constructing authenticity in the absence of any official lineage and in this example at least, it becomes clear that concepts like canonicity, the perceived auteur status of the director, and ideas of genre all become valuable, working to repair the damage of the inauthentic sequel and in the absence of official seriality, provides a means by which consumers can construct authenticity and negotiate the illegitimate and the inauthentic object.

Amazon.co.uk (2018) Zombie Flesh Eaters 3 [DVD] [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Zombie-Flesh-Eaters-3-DVD/product-reviews/B00006CY93/ref=cm\_cr\_arp\_d\_paging\_btm\_1?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews&pageNumber=1 [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018.

The Soft Machine Operator (2002) ‘Zombie Dullards’. [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Zombie-Flesh-Eaters-3-DVD/product-reviews/B00006CY93/ref=cm\_cr\_othr\_d\_paging\_btm\_1?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews&pageNumber=1[Accessed 1 Aug. 2018].

Amazon.com (2018) *Zombi 3* [online] Available at:https://www.amazon.com/Zombi-3-Rene-Abadeza/product-reviews/B0000694YT/ref=cm\_cr\_dp\_d\_show\_all\_top?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018].

General Zombie (2004) ‘[I've seen a lot worse](https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2JU3C07YQQXO6/ref=cm_cr_othr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B0000694YT)’. [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.com/Zombi-3-Rene-Abadeza/product-reviews/B0000694YT/ref=cm\_cr\_dp\_d\_show\_all\_top?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018].

Amazon.de (2018) Zombie 3 [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/B0002JE3HA/ref=cm\_cr\_arp\_d\_paging\_btm\_2?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=2 [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018].

A customer (2001). ‘Poor old fulci’. [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/B0002JE3HA/ref=cm\_cr\_arp\_d\_paging\_btm\_2?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=2 [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018]

Sunbeam (2002) ‘even the zombies run away’. [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/B0002JE3HA/ref=cm\_cr\_arp\_d\_paging\_btm\_2?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=2 [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018]

Criterionmaster (2009) ‘The\_Confusing\_as\_Fuck\_Zombi\_Series’. [online] *Rate Your Music.* Available at: https://rateyourmusic.com/list/criterionmaster/the\_confusing\_as\_fuck\_zombi\_series/ [Last accessed: Aug. 1, 2018].

Fisher, Austin (2011) *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema.* London: I.B. Taurus.

Geraghty, Christine (2008) *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Hunter, I. Q.(2009) ‘Exploitation as adaptation’. In: Smith, I. R. (eds.) *Cultural borrowings: appropriation, reworking, transformation* (Scope, issue 15). Available at : http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/cultborr/chapter.php?id=5. [Last accessed: Aug. 1, 2018].

Koven, Mikel, J (2006) *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*. Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Needham, Gary (2002) ‘Playing with genre: An introduction to the Italian giallo. [online] In: *Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film.* Available at: http://www.kinoeye.org/02/11/needham11.php. [Last accessed: August 1, 2018].

McSweeney, Terence (2010) ‘The Land of the Dead and the Home of the Brave: Romero's vision of a Post 9/11 America’. In Birkenstein, Jeff, Froula, Anna, Randell, Karen (eds.) *Reframing 9/11 Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Wetmore, Jr, Kevin J. (2011) *Back from the Dead: Remakes of the Romero zombie films as markers of their times.* North Carolina: McFarland & Co.

1. Wes Craven’s *Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) employs the Haitian traditional zombie to great effect [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alongside the franchise detailed below *Nightmare City*, *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue*, *Zombie Holocaust*, and *Burial Ground: The Nights of Terror* have all been released as Zombie 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. **A note on methodology** In recent years scholars of reception studies have veered away from using Amazon reviews as a reliable source of information amid concerns that this data may have been distorted by the brands themselves commissioning bogus reviews that work to skew public perception of their products. Despite these concerns, I have chosen to use the platform for two reasons: firstly, I am not dealing with a huge data set (only 87 responses), so I can scrutinize each review individually and I could dismiss any reviews that are clearly automatically generated or Spam (though this wasn’t necessary and only one duplicated review was removed). Secondly and most importantly, the concern over positive bias of web reviews is largely irrelevant to my analysis, since I am only interested in responses to the film as an unofficial entry into an established series. While it is possible that the companies distributing the films would omit this information it is unlikely, since, for anyone familiar with the series (and one would assume someone seeking to purchase Part 3 would be), it is common knowledge that they are unrelated as part 2 features a similar lack of fidelity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The URL for total responses to the film in each of the territories is listed in the bibliography under Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.com, and Amazon.de. For citations that refer to individual responses please see the in-text citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)